‘Strivers’, ‘doers’ and ‘seekers’: social workers and their commitment to the job

Abstract

Amidst considerable interest in the experiences of early career professionals in social work in England and internationally, and the relationship between these and retention and progression, this article reports on the findings of one element of a larger evaluation. It reports the findings and analysis of interviews with 42 relative newcomers to social work, some three years following qualification; focusing on their current career orientations and how these appear to affect their future intentions.

We identified three distinct groups, designated as ‘strivers’, ‘doers’ and ‘seekers’. Each of these groups demonstrated a different kind and level of commitment to their social work role and identity: strivers were oriented towards career progression and taking on senior roles; doers were committed practitioners who saw themselves as continuing in frontline service delivery for the foreseeable future; and seekers, whilst still committed to social work in principle, tended to be more unsure about their future place in the profession.

This typology appears to be reasonably robust on the basis of our investigation, and has implications for career planning, and supervision of social work professionals, especially at the early stages of their careers.

Keywords

Practitioner typology

Career orientation

Retention

Progression

Supervision

Career development

An 'unsettled' profession?

The origins of this article lie in the recurrent and anxious concerns of policy-makers, agencies, managers and academic researchers to understand the career trajectories of those who become professional social workers; and, in particular, to try and get behind the evidence that retention of social workers in direct practice roles is highly problematic (Curtis et al, 2010). As is quite well documented, a central focus of these worries was the question of the factors associated with 'intention to leave', especially in the early stages of one's social work career (Hussein et al, 2014). Problems associated with practitioner retention (as well as recruitment) had in fact become so acute by 2008 that a flurry of policy initiatives by government ministers in England led to a range of innovations designed to improve the situation (Social Work Task Force, 2009; Social Work Reform Board, 2010). Amongst these was the Step Up to Social Work programme, a fast-track qualifying route which sought to improve recruitment and induction of practitioners in child and family social work. The programme, somewhat adapted, is at the time of writing (2018) into its fifth iteration, and is now an established feature of the social work terrain.

The implementation of the programme has also afforded the opportunity for extensive evaluation, of the participant experience (Baginsky and Manthorpe, 2016, for example), cost-effectiveness (Cutmore and Rodger, 2016), and contribution to the recruitment of a high quality social work workforce (xxxx et al, 2013); much of this work commissioned by the Department for Education. As the programme has developed, so too further evaluation has begun to consider the implications for developing social work careers, and those more persistent challenges associated with sustaining a high quality and committed body of practitioners (xxxx et al, 2018). In representing one aspect of a wider investigation of retention and progression of those qualifying via the Step Up to Social Work programme, we believe that this article offers some important insights into practitioner perspectives on their roles and career intentions.

Contextual questions

What follows is an account of one element of the wider evaluation project, drawing on a series of in-depth interviews with both Step Up graduates and an equivalent number of comparators who had qualified through 'mainstream' social work qualifying programmes, both groups having approximately three years' experience as qualified practitioners. The aim of this element of the study was to explore respondents' views of their current career progression and practice, and to ask them to reflect on the kind of grounding and preparation for practice their initial training experience had offered., what emerged were a series of findings which were effectively a 'by product' of the

wider study, but in fact offer some important insights in their own right. Our analysis has enabled us to develop a typology which may well prove beneficial to those with an interest in social workers' career progress and future intentions; as well as helping to focus the career development activities of agencies, managers and supervisors.

As we will show, the typology seems to capture a number of different and clearly distinguishable career orientations, to which we have applied the terms 'strivers', 'doers' and 'seekers', and which seem to engender a sense of where this group of practitioners see themselves at a particular point in their working lives as social work professionals; and, indeed, where they think they are going over the next period of time. We acknowledge that this does only offer us a snapshot, which makes it difficult to infer anything about the permanence or fluidity of these different career orientations; or, indeed, whether they can be applied with similar ease at other career stages. Nonetheless, we believe that it does make a useful contribution.

Our interest in the early careers of social workers is partly shaped by reports of continuing difficulties in sustaining practitioners' long-term commitment; and a relative paucity of useful knowledge about this issue. Noting, for example, a comparatively strong conversion rate from social work qualifying programmes to 'paid employment in social work', Moriarty and Murray (2007, p. 728) have expressed concern that little is known about future career trajectories or 'people's reasons for leaving the profession' (p. 729). While some work is now being undertaken internationally to explore these issues further, both in relation to early career development (Healey et al, 2009; Pösö and Forsman, 2013; xxxx et al, 2015; Baginsky and Manthorpe, 2016), and regarding the decision to leave the profession (Mor Barak et al, 2006; Collins, 2008; McFadden et al, 2015), retention and morale continue to be identified as problematic, notwithstanding some inevitable variation in the international contexts of social work.

Much attention has been paid to both the organisational factors, and the individual characteristics of social work practitioners which might act separately or interactively to influence decisions about staying or leaving (Hussein et al, 2014). Thus, for example, the quality or otherwise of professional supervision has been identified as significant (Gibbs, 2001; Smith, 2005), as have the characteristics of the employing organisation (Mor Barak et al, 2006; Ellett et al, 2007), work pressures (Healy et al, 2009; Baginsky and Manthorpe, 2016), practitioner attributes (Moriarty and Murray, 2007; xxxx et al, 2013; McFadden et al, 2015); motivations (Christie and Kruk, 1998; Parker and Merrylees, 2002; Bozek et al, 2017); and personal factors (Burns, 2011; Pöso and Forsman, 2013); which may all have a part to play in the career decisions of practising social workers. There is, predictably, a strong chance that such factors interact, too (Healy et al, 2009).

Burns' typology

Burns' (2011) study, undertaken in the Republic of Ireland, is of particular interest because his investigation took a very distinctive approach to understanding social work career decisions.

His analysis was based on interviews with 45 practitioners (35 current, and 10 recent leavers) with a variety of experience in 'child protection and welfare' in Ireland; with the aim of understanding the impact of their experiences on career intentions and decisions. A 'grounded theory approach' (Burns, 2011, p. 521) was adopted, prompting Burns to focus on the relationship between practitioners' 'understandings of career pathways in social work', their motivations and their 'subsequent decisions to stay or leave' (p. 522). The analysis of his findings: 'led to the construction of a career preference typology with three 'types' of social worker' (p. 522), each of which was associated with a rather different orientation to practice and variable commitment to remain within child welfare or child protection.

The three practice orientations were identified as 'career preference'; 'transients' and 'converts'. Burns suggests that in the initial phase of entry into child protection and welfare work there were, in fact, two main types, those who had made 'deliberate' and committed decisions to take up child and family social work as a long-term career ('career preference'); and those who saw this field of practice as a 'stepping stone', and had entered the profession as a means of pursuing wider career goals; or in some cases because they felt they had no real choice. In either of these cases, they viewed themselves as 'transients'. However, of this group, some two thirds were found subsequently to revise their initial views, instead making a long-term commitment to child protection work. These were 'converts'. For them, it seems clear, the intrinsic benefits of the job and the sense of achievement associated with doing it well had proved to be significant 'pull factors', influencing the decision to stay.

Although this study was carried out in a different national context to our own, it is relevant; methodologically, because it involved the development of a comparable typology; and substantively, because it sheds light directly on the possible orientations towards their work held by children's social work practitioners. Associated with this, are the potential implications for supervision, management and organisational arrangements, which might impact upon social workers' sense of commitment to their jobs. As will be seen, our analysis does not follow Burns exactly, but we would certainly acknowledge the contribution of his work to our own developing typology associated observations.

Our approach: interviews and analysis

The findings reported here were generated as a discrete element of a larger, mixed method longitudinal evaluation (xxxx et al, 2018). This component of the study was designed as a qualitative investigation, whose aim was to explore the relationship between social workers' career experiences and expectations, and their previous preparation to take up the role of a social work professional, through their qualifying programmes and their early interactions with the working environment.

We adopted a comparative approach, consistent with the intentions of the wider study to draw out important similarities and differences between SUSW and other qualifying routes, in terms of both the characteristics of the participants themselves or their differing experiences of education, practice-based learning and induction into the profession. We thus recruited a sample of 21 SUSW graduates from the first cohort of the programme (completing the programme in 2012); and the same number of participants who had qualified by other routes ('comparators'), also predominantly at postgraduate level, and who had approximately the same length of practice experience in child and family social work following qualification, around three years. Although this comparative strategy was important in terms of the wider study, it did not in the end have much bearing on the findings reported here; the typology we will go on to discuss applies equally across both groups, we suggest.

Our interviewees were recruited as volunteers from the respondents to an online survey conducted as part of the larger study of which this was one component. Most were female (36/42), under forty (35/42), white (40/42), and currently employed by local authorities (36/42). All were working in child and family social work settings at the time of the interview, and around a third had already been promoted to senior roles of one kind or another.

The interviews were designed to explore key aspects of respondents' experiences, such as the quality and relevance of their qualifying programmes; and their reflections on their careers to date, including support for career development and their own progression. Our data collection strategy was constructed to preserve the anonymity of our respondents and to avoid identifying their work setting; and ethical approval was granted for the wider study from which these findings were drawn by the Research Ethics Committee of the Department of Sociology at (…) University.

The interviews were conducted by phone and lasted between 45 and 90 minutes; they were all recorded and transcribed; and they were then submitted to analysis through NVivo. This process initially took the form of a thematic analysis, carried out principally by one member of the research team, but with other members who had carried out interviews acting as moderators. From this

exercise, a number of core conceptual categories were identified, such as 'career goals', for instance; in turn, associated with a series of differential responses which formed the basis of an emergent 'typology'.

In order to achieve robustness and veracity, this was supplemented by a further cross-sectional analysis to test the plausibility of our initial findings. Thus, the initial classification of responses according to the identified analytical categories was re-analysed cross-sectionally by respondent to verify that these themes were represented consistently and clearly through the course of individual interviews; for example, in the case of one of the emergent classifications ('seekers'), uncertainty expressed by respondents about career goals might be found to align with concerns about the quality of prior learning, and criticism of the level of in work support available .

It is this confirmatory aspect of the analysis which affords us a degree of confidence in the sustainable credibility of the typology as an explanatory device.

The emergent patterns that we have identified could be described as the providential outcome of an analytical strategy informed by grounded theory principles (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Despite their contingent character, the findings appear to us to be sufficiently robust to support the conceptual framework we have developed.

The interview findings: emerging differences

Our interview findings across both participant groups (Step Up to Social Work graduates and Comparators) have indicated that there is persuasive evidence of distinct orientations towards their social work careers, which appears to support the notion of a three-fold typology, as outlined. These groups have been described by us as: 'strivers', 'doers' and 'seekers'.

The interviews were intended to explore the motivations and ambitions, course experiences, career choice influences and ongoing belief in the value of social work as a professional vocation, with the overarching aim of identifying factors which might contribute either to a continuing commitment to the job or to dissatisfaction and discouragement, in much the same way as Burns (2011) had previously sought to determine in Ireland.

We report our findings here under a series of headings, which encompass the expectations and early experiences of social workers moving from pre-qualifying training into the early stages of their professional career.

1. Motivations and ambitions

The interesting distinction between respondents in terms of their initial motivations to enter social work concerned their level of certainty, even at this early stage of what might be called testing the water. So, those we have come to categorise as 'doers' expressed this in terms of an original and continuing vocational commitment more or less from the start:

> 'I did always have this sort of interest in people who seem to be going through difficult times'. ('Doer[1]', Step Up to Social Work' (SUSW), Female, 43)
> 'I knew that I wanted to do something working, like working directly with people. I was already thinking I want to get more involved'. ('Doer', SUSW, F, 34)

Perhaps equally certain of themselves but expressing their aspirations in more instrumental terms, the 'strivers' saw their initial enrolment in social work qualifying programmes as a means to an end:

> 'I wasn't quite sure how long I'd want to stay in this field… it was… kind of… a stepping stone'. (Striver, SUSW, F, 26)
> 'I wasn't really able to fund myself to do a social work masters so it [Step Up] was an easy way to get that funded, and also it was attractive because it was quite quick' (Striver, SUSW, F, 36)
> 'I want to become a senior practitioner within the next year or so…. That's my goal… That's my ambition at the moment' (Striver, Comparator, F, 51)

On the other hand, a degree of ambivalence or uncertainty on the part of the 'seekers' was evident at the start of their journey:

> 'I didn't really think too much about what my long term plan would be'. (Seeker, SUSW, F, 28)
> 'I just thought, "Wow, what an opportunity." But, obviously, the thought of it being an intensive 18 month masters with placements meant quite a lot of anxiety.' (Seeker, SUSW, F, 27)

[1] We are using the typology categories to present the findings, and expand on the meaning of these terms in our discussion of them.

> ‘I imagined that I would have a minimum of two years’ statutory experience… and after that… I would probably… either have moved into the voluntary sector or possibly… [an] academic [position]’ (Seeker, Comparator, F, 43)

Similar distinctions can be drawn when we consider the ambitions of those joining qualifying programmes. For seekers, for example, there was a certain lack of definition about their career goals:

> ‘I don’t think I ever wanted to be like a team leader or anything’ (Seeker, Comparator, F, 55)
> ‘I wanted to become a social worker, but I also wanted to have more involvement with the child’s life. And I also wanted to become qualified in something’ (Seeker, SUSW, F, 30)
> ‘So, originally I had wanted to work with children with disabilities, and that is still something that I think about…’ (Seeker, SUSW, F, 27)

For others, though, the role they were moving into represented a perfect fit:

> ‘I think I imagined myself working as a social worker probably with children or young people. But beyond that, no, I hadn’t got any particular ambition.’ (Doer, SUSW, F, 53)
> ‘I’ve never really wanted to go down the management [route]. I was much more attracted by the idea of sort of specialising as your career goes on…’ (Doer, SUSW, F, 36)

And, for the third group, aspirations to achieve leadership roles had apparently formed early on:

> ‘I think my manager and service manager [know the] role I would want to go for, so they would give me opportunities to meet the criteria for that role.’ (Striver, SUSW, F, 27)
> ‘I am interested in progression and what is my next challenge.’ (Striver, SUSW, F, 32)

2. Course experiences

Whilst it might seem fairly straightforward to differentiate responses according to motivations or ambitions, it might not be quite so obvious that similar differences would emerge from responses to questions about course experiences. In practice, though, it did seem that respondents’ accounts of their initial expectations were related to their depictions of their subsequent journeys through pre-qualifying programmes, especially where these posed challenges or led to setbacks. Of course, we are reliant in this case on retrospective recollections and reconstructions which may give the

appearance of greater coherence to the pattern of events than was actually to be observed as they occurred. With this caveat, we are reasonably confident in articulating the patterns observed.

For those whose priority was learning the job, it was clear that they were principally interested in the practical and applied aspects of their learning:

> 'One of the positive things… was, they would bring in speakers who were working in the field.' (Doer, SUSW, F, 43)

And, in a somewhat plaintive tone:

> '[W]e did so much on kind of research and sociology…. We only had one day on attachment. (Doer, SUSW, F, 36)

Others who prioritised the task over their ambitions spoke about the value they attributed to placements which offered them direct experience of the team settings and the type of work they would be doing on qualifying.

> 'I think that some of that [knowledge base] came more from the practice elements [of the programme]'. (Doer, Comparator, F, 32)

For those who were committed to 'getting on', the sense that this was a demanding new programme and perhaps inevitably somewhat disorganised in its first iteration was not experienced as excessively problematic but rather as the sort of challenge one might expect and something to be met head on. There was a sense that as advanced learners, participants should actually expect to have to take the initiative:

> 'I think at master's level it is what you make of it…. If you expect to be spoon-fed and expect that to be enough, I think you'd be disappointed.' (Striver, SUSW, F, 34)
> '[T]here's always going to be instances…, you've always got to be challenged, I guess.' (Striver, SUSW, M, 33)
> '[I think] at the time I thought it was absolutely fantastic… we did a really good module on anti-oppressive practice kind of going through research'. (Striver, Comparator, F, 30)

But on the other hand, consistent with the greater degree of uncertainty about where they stood in career terms identified previously, 'Seekers' were also rather less satisfied with the capacity of their learning experience to prepare them for the challenges of practice. Indeed, for some of this group, prior learning clearly lacked relevance:

‘I really loved the academic work… but for the day-to-day work of the job now… it is heavily process driven… and for me that is something that I found quite limiting….’ (Seeker, Comparator, F, 43)

‘[The qualifying programme] probably didn’t prepare me for quite how difficult some of what I’ve had to deal with has been, in terms of child protection, and the hostility….’ (Seeker, SUSW, F, 27)

[T]here was a lot of focus on… theory, but I’d say it was the wrong sort of theory… we spent more time studying grand theory rather than theoretical models that had more of a basis in social work, … such as… motivational interviewing or systemic practice.’ (Seeker, SUSW, F, 28)

3. Work experiences and influences on career choices

The patterns identified in the earlier stages of our interviews were also apparent when we considered respondents’ evaluations of their experiences in social work practice; these did appear to have influenced decisions about future career directions. As interviewees were roughly three years into their professional careers in child and family social work, this kind of decision would of course be pivotal, not just for them, but in terms of the potential impact of career changes on organisational and service stability.

For the Seekers, for instance, there was some evidence of insecurity and a degree of dependency on practice supervisors and managers:

‘[You]… need to like ask for help when you need it. And I think, you know, I didn’t do that enough.’ (Seeker, SUSW, F, 30)

‘So, she [manager] was quite hard on me early on, actually, in a way, now I kind of think helped….’ (Seeker, SUSW, F, 27)

Being left in limbo in discussions:

‘between managers, I find that very frustrating….’ (Seeker, Comparator, F, 43)

‘[I]t was just baptism of fire, basically. I was like, wow, what on earth is going on here? And I just didn’t feel protected. And then I was in court on my own, stuff like that… it was horrific. You just didn’t know what was expected of you, or what to do.’ (Seeker, SUSW, F, 28)

There is a clear contrast in tone and perspective here between those who are less sure of themselves and those who do see every challenge as an opportunity. Referring to a previous placement experience, one respondent said:

> 'You get stronger and more confident and more knowledgeable once you've actually doing… and presented with various solutions.' (Achiever, Comparator, M, 45)
> 'Absolutely everything I might come across, I was dealing with. That was huge for me in terms of thinking I would be able to manage.' (Achiever, SUSW, F, 27)

For another, similarly upbeat interviewee, reflecting on the benefits of the Step to Social Work route into practice, the transition from student status to that of qualified practitioner:

> 'was brilliant… I had the same manager and the same team, so from day one they were like, here you go, straight into it, and they knew me… so I was able to learn a lot quicker, I think, and progress to more complex cases more quickly as well.' (Achiever, SUSW, F, 36)

Continuity and certainty were also important to those who were simply committed to doing the job well:

> 'Generally the team now is really settled in. It's always been really supportive and welcoming so that kind of helped me settle in and if I ever have an issue, I know I can speak to people within the team or gain support from them and that'd be really, really important.' (Doer, SUSW, F, 26)

Other comments, too, were offered about the qualities of fellow professionals and how this established an ethos grounded in enduring social work values:

> 'I believe the most professional people I've worked with, dedicated, have been people who are selfless with their practice… the real difference is people who really care about the children and the families they work with and have the years of experience to back it up as well.' (Doer, SUSW, M, 35)

Another respondent attributed her career achievements to date to:

> 'kind of working along with people who've been doing it for a little bit longer, and looking at people's good work, or knowing about the things people get wrong.' (Doer, Comparator, F, 32)

4. Commitment to social work

In a context where there appears to be continuing concern about retention of social work practitioners, respondents' comments about their continuing levels of commitment to the profession are of particular interest. Where did they stand at this point in their early careers; and were there distinctive features of their responses? For many respondents, it was the quality of their working relationships which were crucial, as well as the level of support on which they could call both in and outside work. In some cases, an explicit link was made between their sense of being supported and encouraged and future aspirations:

> 'I said… I want to go on this training. I want to go on that training. I've been backed all the way on that, and if I'd had a manager who said, actually, no… you know, I may have gone somewhere else…. I haven't had to look outside. I am interested in progression and what is my next challenge.' (Striver, SUSW, F, 34)

> 'I've had a lot of brilliant training that's on offer in the local authority…. I think that by continuing with education and learning new things that's really helped to keep me interested and motivated… to think about moving forward rather than just carrying on with [what I'm doing].' (Striver, SUSW, F, 36)

For others, though 'just carrying on' was enough:

> *Interviewer*: 'Where do you see yourself in two years from now? Will you still be in social work?'
> *Respondent*: 'Yes, I hope so. Probably in a reasonably similar position to that I am now really'. (Doer, Comparator, F, 32)

In explaining at length why she was not keen on progressing into management, one interviewee described herself as:

> 'a bit disenchanted [with] 'the bureaucracy, the politics' but 'not with work… working directly with families… I kind of feel like I don't want to be put in that position, because I can control what I'm doing.' (Doer, SUSW, F, 43)

In another case, it was the influence of a strong role model which had shaped the respondent's aspirations to remain in or near practice:

> ‘My final practice educator… she was really challenging… but kind of her as a role model and her own practice… using that I think definitely as kind of a benchmark about where I want to be and where I want to get to.’ (Doer, SUSW, F, 26)

For some, though, the transition to fully qualified status had been something of a shock and had perhaps led them to question their commitment:

> ‘[P]eople forget that actually you’re only just recently qualified… And also you suddenly start to get child protection cases almost immediately. Nobody comes out with you on the visits. Nobody comes out with you to meetings.’ (Seeker, SUSW, F, 45)

> ‘We had a visiting lecturer… he was a very experienced social worker… and I remember him saying “who likes filling in forms?”… all these really negative things… and thinking “oh, I’m sure you’re just being… really negative”. And now… I definitely understand the frustrations’. (Seeker, Comparator, 43)
>
> ‘You just didn’t know what was expected of you, or what to do.’ (Seeker, SUSW, F, 28)

Towards a typology? Analysing response patterns

As the above findings illustrate, there was a range of responses to our questions about child and family practitioners’ experiences of qualifying programmes and their transitions to the initial phase of their careers as practitioners; but this range also revealed a discernible and consistent pattern.

We have, on this basis been able to map out a series of characteristics and attitudes associated with the three categories, which we outline here.

1. *Strivers*

   This group could be characterised collectively in terms of their confidence and ambition. They tend to move into social work because they see it as a positive career change; they are eager to progress; and they believe they are ‘doing well’ currently. They feel that their social work qualifying programmes were helpful, essentially because the practice learning opportunities enabled them to gain early insights into the realities of the professional role. They believe that they are responsible for their own learning and should not necessarily expect overly close supervision or direction in pursuing professional development. They aspire to progress in their careers, either by going into

management or by increasing practice specialisation, and sometimes they feel held back by the constraints of their existing work settings. They welcome challenge, and see this as being an integral part of the social work landscape.

2. *Doers*

   For this group, the job is everything. There is some indication that they might have rather more prior experience than others before entering the profession; and this might be the basis for their continuing desire to do well as practitioners but not to progress to more senior roles disconnected from practice. Like 'strivers', they value the practice elements of their prior learning, but they do see the value of relevant university-based teaching which enables them to make connections between theory and practice. They 'put up' with working conditions and management behaviour which they see as less than ideal, essentially because of their underlying commitment to doing right by children and families; and they gain a considerable sense of internal reward from their achievements in practice. They remain committed, too, to professional development, because they want to improve their ability to offer a good and effective service.

3. *Seekers*

   Our third group are not dissatisfied with their career choice, but their commitment is more conditional, and their future aspirations are not as clear as they are for the other groups. They are the most likely to find fault with either their qualifying experience, or the quality of supervision and support provided since qualification. They seem rather more dependent on support from colleagues in more senior roles; and they are also more sensitive to the pressures of the job. They are concerned at a perceived lack of public respect for social workers; and there is a sense that they are uncertain about what is best for them professionally. They are not necessarily thinking of leaving social work, but they perhaps feel that they did not appreciate the scale and nature of the challenge involved in becoming a child and family social worker beforehand.

Discussion: the implications for policy, professional development and educators

In constructing this typology, we acknowledge the risk of presenting a picture which is too neat, and does not allow for exceptional cases; or, importantly, changes over time. Although we are confident that the typology is plausible and represents a degree of coherence and unity in respondents' career orientations and expectations, some were clearly more easily categorised than others.

Given that this was a study focusing on a precise point in the developing careers of professional social workers, we do not discount the likelihood that the categories identified are reasonably fluid. It is entirely possible for someone who is uncomfortable in a particular team setting or practice environment to find their niche in another social work role; so, perhaps moving from the category of 'seeker' to that of 'doer', as Burns' (2011) account seems to suggest.

Nonetheless, our analysis did reveal considerable consistency and coherence in early career social workers' responses; and we assert that this provides a sufficient level of assurance to advance the proposed typology as a helpful device for understanding possible career trajectories in child and family social work.

Some important questions therefore arise about the nature and robustness of social workers' commitment (or lack of commitment) to their role, and the extent to which career development pathways and organisational practices are able to sustain, reinforce or reignite their belief in what they are doing, as follows:

1. To what extent are practice orientations susceptible to external influences, or are they largely self-sustaining?
2. What is the extent to which social worker orientations to the job are fixed? Can they move between 'types', as Burns (2011, p. 530) appears to suggest.
3. What are the origins of the specific orientation adopted by individual practitioners? Are they guided by prior experience, personal qualities, motivation or organisational factors, for instance?
4. What are the implications of our analysis for organisational practices and the management and supervision of child and family social workers?

Further work is required to consider these questions in detail, especially the extent to which social workers' perceptions of the job are 'plastic', and subject to changing circumstances and indeed self-perceptions. Notably, this issue has been a matter of debate amongst analysts of career decision-making for some time (Holland and Gottfriedson, 1976).

Nonetheless, there are some indications from our own and others' work of the potential for using typologies as a tool to guide approaches to professional development in children's social work. Burns' (2011, p. 531) observation, for example, that 'the stimulation and rewards of working with children and families at risk, and the quality of social supports with peers' can prompt a change of plans and a strengthening of commitment to practice is on the face of it, quite encouraging. In this instance, he seems to be alluding to a process of transition, on the part of a 'transient' (in his terms)

or ‘seeker’ (in ours) to becoming a ‘convert’ or ‘doer’, simply on the basis of the intrinsic worth of the task and a collective commitment to the goal of protecting children. On the other hand, there is plenty of evidence to suggest that commitment alone is insufficient insulation against other factors which may destabilise practitioners and increase levels of uncertainty about their status (Jones, 2001).

So, for some of our sample, belief in the value of the task was enough:

> ‘I think you need to be, have a core of resilience inside you and a real care for people. I think those are two things you need really, to really care’ (Doer, SUSW, F, 53).

For others, though, the experience of poor treatment by others within the organisation was destabilising:

> ‘You expect to get abuse, from you know, family members, parents who are angry or whatever, that you expect. But you don’t expect to get it from colleagues or your managers. But unfortunately, as my career has continued on, it’s quite a common occurrence. And I think it’s a shame that when your focus should be on the children, you’re supposed to be working to protect, but sometimes you’re actually having to focus on protecting yourself’ (Seeker, SUSW, F, 43).

Indeed, we tended to find that those who were less certain of themselves of their role were also more likely to be put off by other aspects of their experience, including pressures of work, insensitive management, inadequate supervision and so on. Others would tend to shrug off or work through these challenges, perhaps even treating them as an inevitable inconvenience: ‘I was getting quite poorly at work… it’s hard to say whether or not it was because of social work or workload or whether it would have happened anyway… I think I’ve just become more resilient… I think I’m a much better practitioner… I’ve got the bug [for social work] now’ (Doer, SUSW, M, 35). As noted above, though, we should be wary in attributing attributes and outcomes simply to the intrinsic characteristics or work orientations of practitioners themselves. We acknowledge that the wider organisational and structural environment and its impacts on workers’ experiences and attitudes towards their jobs cannot be ignored, and we would not wish to suggest that the proposed typology is not susceptible to such influences. Contextual factors, whether positive in the sense of welcoming and supportive colleagues, or negative in the sense of excessive workloads and oppressive systems, must be ‘factored in’ to any consideration either of the orientations practitioners are likely to bring to their work , or of best practice on the part of organisations and supervisors in providing constructive support and development opportunities.

Putting the lessons to use: towards a proactive approach to career development?

Despite our caveats, these findings suggest that supervisors, managers and agencies must make every effort to understand their staff and their particular orientations to practice. The support and development opportunities required will need to be attuned to workers' perspectives on the task. We are reminded here, for instance, of the practical value of the typology developed by Stein (2012) in the context of young people leaving care which itself illustrates the importance of sensitivity to young people's *specific* trajectories through and beyond the care system.

Similarly, we can reasonably conclude that active 'matching' of practitioners to the roles for which they are most suited and the career pathways to which they aspire is also essential if they are to find themselves fulfilled in their roles, and able to contribute most effectively to the wider objective of enhancing the well-being of children. For some, this is the case: 'I mean the team I am working with have been fantastic, you know there is a lot of people around me that have been really helpful in pushing me in the right direction really' (Striver, SUSW, M, 30).

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